

Ken Cook
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

December 16, 2016

Ken Cook—KC
Ron Kroese—RK

This is Ron Kroese, and today is Friday, December 16, 2016. I am in downtown San Francisco in the California office of the Environmental Working Group (EWG), where today I have the pleasure of interviewing its founder and president, Ken Cook. Ken has been a leader for many years as an activist and an eloquent spokesman for reforms to agriculture and to the food system at large, going all the way back to the 1970s, and we hope to cover quite a bit of that territory today.

I like to start these interviews with everyone going back to even your childhood. How did you first get interested in this? We imagine ourselves looking at this, or listening to and looking at this interview 50 or 100 years from now, and I think people will wonder who were these characters, why were they willing to go through the struggles that they did, and what formed them to take on this role. So I'd like to have you start with your childhood—was it Missouri?

KC: Yeah.

RK: And take us up through your education. That would be helpful.

KC: Sure. It's great to be here, great to visit with you, Ron. I grew up in suburban Saint Louis. It was a tract home development. My mom and dad purchased it, and my dad only lived about a year or so after they bought the House, and he died of cancer. He was a farm boy who came to town, was working for an insurance company at the time that he was diagnosed with cancer. He was actually diagnosed when he went in to get the physical exam he needed to increase his own insurance policy. So it was quite a blow to the family, obviously, and my mom carried on. My Aunt Ruthie moved in, her sister moved in, so I was raised by two women, my whole life, and we lived in an idyllic time for a kid. I lived in a neighborhood that was full of other kids. It was built on farmland, and there was one farmer left, Mr. Sanders. He had a truck farm right above me, right above the hill, and we'd dam up his irrigation ditches and make big ponds out of it and just raise all kinds of trouble, and he managed to somehow keep going for many, many years, selling produce right out of a shop that he had next to his house, so that was one connection, but the main connection was on my dad's side of the family, the Cook family. They were from the country, and they had farming operations, one in Desoto, Missouri, and the other in Roselle, Missouri, the more distant from Saint Louis. That was about 70, 80 miles away, and in Roselle, it was a cow-calf operation in this one part of the Midwest where the granite came up through the limestone and the sandstone and started off as a big area for mining, lead mines in particular—also iron, but lead, in particular. That's where Grandpa Cook decided to set up farming—the

worse soil in the Midwest is where he decided to farm, so by the time I came along they no longer were growing small grains or row crops, because they'd started ... they were in the cattle business at that time—cow-calf operation. So I spent a lot of my summers and a lot of my vacations. Even after my dad died, I would go down and be with all my cousins and aunts and uncles on the Cook side. That was the agriculture connection for me, and the reason it was so important—I didn't realize it at the time, except that I was really the only kid in that whole neighborhood who had farm connections. If anyone wanted to go to a farm, they would always end up coming with me down to my Uncle Paul's or my Uncle Claude's, and that was the case right through college. So from the very beginning I was lucky—I was exposed to agriculture, which is, you know, saying something, because that was the '50s. Even then everyone's connections to agriculture and to raising food and animals was becoming more and more distant. But I was lucky, so I got to have that connection.

RK: Yeah, I have the similar kind of background, although mine was a small town in Iowa where my uncle's farm was. My dad worked in the creamery, and the uncle's farm was our whole family's life around it, and at that time they still allowed milk to be put in cans, so every farm would have a few cows. Therefore, they had a pasture, therefore, they had a diversified operation, and it was a wonderful way to grow up. That very farm now is all in corn and beans, and that creek that we used to play in is now a straightened waterway. We were fortunate to have that.

KC: We had this, it was the same thing at my Uncle Paul's farm. They had chickens and they sold eggs. They had a huge garden. They did have milk cows for awhile, but after time, of course, they had to focus on the beef cattle. It was a time where you kind of had a glimpse at the distant past. Things hadn't changed so much that you could see practices and a culture that probably hadn't changed much for the 50 preceding years. Now it's hard to see that, I think.

RK: It is, it's definitely hard to see it. So then you went to school, you went to college, and what did you take up?

KC: I went to the University of Missouri at Columbia. At first I was a history major, spent a lot of time worrying about environmental issues. Even in high school I had read Barry Commoner and Paul Erlich. Then when I was a junior at the University of Missouri, I went to England for a junior year abroad, and from there I was just so lucky—I got to go to the Stockholm conference on the environment, the first U.N. conference on the environment, in 1972. I later went to the second one in 1992 in Brazil and met some of the people I had met 20 years earlier, but it was really something that changed my thinking. It helped me understand what I wanted to do, which was I wanted to learn enough about science, wanted to be engaged in science enough that I wouldn't be afraid of it. I didn't think of my future as being a bench scientist or a researcher, in that sense, but I really did understand the power, hearing Erlich and Commoner, in particular, including their debate in Stockholm. I did really find that it was important to understand the physical and biological sciences in a way I hadn't thought of before. I had thought of a career in law, following history and so forth, but this really focused me on the environment. In particular it made me appreciate the unusual exposure I had had to nature through agriculture, so when I came back from junior year abroad, I immediately got interested in trying to pursue some sort of science, didn't know exactly what, and I realized at that point I could through the University of

Missouri's agriculture school, college of agriculture, and I could in an accelerated way take a whole bunch of course work that satisfied my interest in science that had bloomed kind of late. So I got a bachelor's in history, then I continued another year and got a B.S. in agriculture and an M.S. in soil science, working with some really great professors there at the time. Woody Woodruff was the guy, one of the early pioneers of no-till farming. In 1972,'73,'74 I was watching him do his plot work at Sanborn Field on no-till farming, which was just at the beginning then. My thesis advisor was Ellis Graham, and he had worked at Los Alamos during the war as a radiation health expert, trying to study the impacts of radiation on the environment and on people, and then he later applied what he learned to soil science. So I was studying using radioactive materials that we were able to generate from our research reactor at the University of Missouri. I was able to do a whole series of research studies, working with Dr. Graham, looking at various elements important to agriculture, like selenium, the micro-nutrient in feed. That was my master's thesis, was looking at...

RK: Oh, it was! I didn't know any of this.

KC: Yeah, low levels of selenium, very low levels of selenium in fescue as a micro-nutrient. And selenium was one of these weird substances where there's a very narrow range between where it's a micro-nutrient and beneficial and slightly higher level where it's acutely toxic. When I did my master's thesis, and this, I think, led to my interest in the environment even more...

RK: I would think, in human health, too.

KC: Yeah, and toxic substances. The stories that I included in my master's were about cattle ranchers out West, they'd turn their animals loose in a little draw or ravine and come back in the morning, they'd all be dead, because they'd all eaten these plants that had taken up selenium. And that later, of course, happened in California with the irrigation water that left selenium on the surface. So looking back, I wish I could say I had a plan. I didn't really have a plan, but I see where some of the pieces came together. And then I decided I wanted to come to Washington, DC. I was always interested in politics and policy, and I was encouraged in that by my mom and Aunt Ruth. They were very sociable people, and they were connected to Democratic Party people in the city, so I had some exposure. So I came to Washington and I fell, by merest chance, into a job at the Library of Congress, the Congressional Research Service. I worked with some great analysts there who had been at the Department of Agriculture—Barry Carr in particular, the agricultural economist, and he taught me how to do policy analysis, and so they brought me in thinking that it might be useful to have someone on the staff who knew about natural resources and conservation, which I had learned from my soil science background. But it turned out that this is shortly after Earl Butz predicted that the government was going to get out of agriculture forever because the boom was never going to stop, prices were going to stay high, we needed to push the government aside so that we could pursue the free market. Well, by the time I really got to Washington—this would be in about 1976—there were tractors on the mall, protesting. It was a disaster, of course. It was horrible for rural America. I remember talking to my relatives back in rural America who weren't in on the boom and bust, because they were in the grass business—they had cow-calf operations. So they were going through their own cycles as the cattle cycle always did, but they weren't hit in the way that the folks up north were, who

had plowed up all this ground chasing those high corn and soybean prices, only to see them collapse and have the debt load that was so crushing. So that's when I came to Washington. So they took me completely out of studying soil conservation and natural resource issues—no one was interested in that—and they threw me into learning the commodity programs. So that was how, a few years later, I was one of a handful, relative handful, of environmental and conservation-oriented researchers who had paid attention to the subsidy programs of that time. So that led to some engagement later on with agricultural policy that really established my career.

RK: I'm sure it did. And then somewhere in there—I don't want to jump too far ahead—you went with the World Wildlife Fund, too. Did that happen shortly after?

KC: Yeah, just before the '85 Farm Bill I was a consultant for a whole bunch of groups. I wrote the report for the American Farmland Trust, "Soil Conservation—What Do We have to Lose?" I was working very closely with two amazing people, Bob Gray and Norm Berg.

RK: I've interviewed Bob.

KC: Yeah, Bob was our leader in the '85 Farm Bill on the conservation side, and I'd learned a lot from watching him very skillfully guide coalitions. It's a skill I don't particularly have, but he really did have it. He was at American Farmland Trust at that time, in '83, '84. Worked a lot with Chuck Benbrook, who was at the National Academy. He really was indispensable to helping write that report with me. He was very, very closely involved. And really, meeting Chuck early-on, and I guess I was a freelance writer for the *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* in the early '80s, writing columns for them for the editor, Max Schnepf, and those commentaries got me involved in the politics of soil and water conservation in a deep way, and I met Chuck Benbrook at that time, and he came to my House one day. I was broke, I was a freelance writer living in West Virginia, I had no money, and he said—you know what? You ought to do some consulting for the American Farmland Trust. They're looking for somebody to write a report for this 1985 Farm Bill that's coming. And some of the ideas that we were playing with at the time that later became the Conservation Reserve Program and Sodbuster that came out of Colorado, and Senator Bill Armstrong and his interest in that. They were coming together in the period of, sort of, '83 to '84, and around that time was when we published the AFT report, and with Bob's advocacy, and Doug Wheeler, who was running the American Farmland Trust—he went to Sierra Club shortly after that for a stretch—this was the core of the conservation coalition that, for the first time, brought mainstream environmental groups into the farm bill debate. In '84, '85, I was a consultant for AFT, for the Audubon Society, for Sierra Club, did some work for the Department of Agriculture. I was actually writing Garth Youngberg's "Alternative Agriculture Newsletter" at that time, too, so I was kind of a busy guy, but enjoying it. It was very exciting to see this new area open up that the environmental movement had never really paid much attention to before. It was also not really exactly about regulation at that point. There were quasi-regulatory elements about it linking subsidies to conservation, but it was apart from the main thrust of the environmental movement at that point, which was built around the Clean Air Act, Endangered Species Act, the emerging debate over Superfund, Safe Drinking Water Act, and so forth. These were all primarily regulatory frameworks. We had to take a different approach in agriculture. We had different jurisdictions to deal with on Capitol Hill, not friendly towards

regulation and so forth. I guess if I look back at that time, we passed so many environmental laws, right, in the '70s and '80s. Sometimes you'd run into fellow lobbyists on the Hill, and by that time I really was a lobbyist, by the mid-80s, and, you know, might be a clutch of seven or eight people just catching up in a hallway, and we'd be working collectively on two or three different pieces of legislation that would pass that year, right? So it was an era where we were really still seeing the environmental movement having these legislative successes that were extraordinary. We didn't think they were extraordinary, we just thought this was the right thing to do and the political process was responding, and things were rolling along. We couldn't have passed a single one of those laws in the past decade. We couldn't pass the Wilderness Act—celebrated the 50th anniversary a few years ago. Clean Air Clean Water, Endangered Species, Superfund—even the original farm bill conservation title—there's not a single one of those laws that we could get a majority for in the Senate or the House over the past decade. So it really tells you that a lot of things changed. I mean, that in itself is an important topic, but back then we were all of the view that if you took the latest scientific understandings that were supported by independent scientists and researchers in the field and came to the halls of power in Washington, you'd get a fair hearing, that there was an interest in the facts, trying to understand what was shaping the natural world, how human beings, how human activity was having an impact. And it was astonishing that you had people with an open mind in both parties. I mean, we spent a lot of time lobbying Republican members, who were more than willing to listen to ideas. They were some of our chief supporters. I remember lobbying Senator Heinz and so many giants in the Senate—Chafee and ... on and on, who really did get it that we had gone too far in pushing the limits of the environment, the natural world, and were causing these, in some cases, irreversible problems that we needed to pull back from. And so it was a different era, and so when the '85 Farm Bill came along, we had a very receptive audience in the Agriculture committee for two reasons: one, there was a sense that the Congress at large had a hunger for environmental protection and conservation. Secondly, these were very difficult times for agriculture, and the House and Senate agriculture committees knew that they had to go to the floor of the House and the Senate with their farm bills with broader appeal than they'd had in the past. They'd added the food stamp part, and that had attracted urban voters, but the conservation title in '85 became the third leg of the stool.

RK: Right, it became an actual title in farm bill.

KC: Absolutely, yeah, yeah.

RK: I think I want to go back a little bit. I have heard this same kind of view, and I remember it myself from the '80s—I sort of think, my theory about that, for what it's worth, is in some respects the country was recovering from the Vietnam War, and there were efforts to try to make things better again and bring people back together. Some of the people that got elected out of that came out of there more open-minded to change. Things like Agent Orange woke people up, what we'd done to Vietnam.

KC: Right. I think the U.N. conference woke people up, and *Silent Spring* had not been out that long at that point, serialized in the *New Yorker*.

RK: One of the things, when you mention Bob Gray, I just want to touch on again is the ag lands study that revealed the amount of damage that was happening. Ag lands come out of the Butz era. That motivated several of us, including my work with Land Stewardship Project and things like that.

KC: Well, I think the Carter administration—it was only one term—but when you look at some of the work that got started then, when looking at the impact of policy on family farms, looking at agricultural land, looking at organic agriculture for the first time, right?

RK: Tell that story a little bit, about your part of that with Garth, etc.

KC: I was an observer. I was freelancing, writing for the *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* at that time, and doing a little work, freelance, for the *Des Moines Register* and other outlets. But what I noted at that point was this was the first time that organic was taken seriously by enough important people in the research establishment that it really caught on. And I thought Garth's role and (James) Parr, who did a great job, too, right? He was instrumental in really giving intellectual credence and credibility to the enquiry about whether a different way of farming would work, at this point when everyone was just assuming that organic meant outdated, so their pioneering worked, done as a Department of Agriculture study...

RK: Right, thanks to Bob Bergland, good Minnesota guy.

KC: Yeah, that's right—Secretary Bergland, absolutely. My first wife, my ex-wife, Susan Sechler played a key role in making sure those products got out the door, right before the door slammed shut. Reagan came in, fired Norm Berg, the head of the Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resource Conservation Service—that was a scandal. And also forced Garth out. So we suddenly lost two very prominent spokespeople for an independent look at natural resources, which ... it had always been a career position. Norm Berg had come up through the ranks of SCS, spent his whole career there. And then the foothold we had for organic agriculture, and these were important losses to the community. I think it galvanized our determination to push forward, because we saw these glimmers of what would happen if you had enlightened government taking a look at this system that hadn't been questioned before. It was the green revolution, it was success after success supposedly—higher and higher yields and the ability of farmers to control weeds on a massive scale, and therefore expand their operations. The final step of mechanization in agriculture being those field operations that really allowed scale to grow rampantly. And so I really do think that a lot of us, a core group of us, were very inspired to push back, and going into the 1985 Farm Bill we had an opportunity to band together, so it was Maureen Hinkle from the Audubon Society, who I credit with teaching me how to lobby. No one lobbied better than she did—ferocious and yet gentle and commanding at the same time—just a force of nature. Dan Weiss, who was at the Sierra Club at that time. Bob, of course, was an incredibly energetic lobbyist. Norm was always there in his gentle way to provide the wisdom that the brash lobbyists brought to bear. We just had a small but really effective group of individuals who banded together under the so-called Conservation Coalition and we met every week under Bob's leadership. He was extraordinary. We were able to pull together—out of really not much—we were able to pull together the conservation title. And before long it included the Conservation Reserve Program to take land out of farming, instead of the annual set-asides that we had at the

time. We had provisions like Sodbuster that put conditions on breaking out new land. That came out of the outrageous abuse of rangeland and pastureland in eastern Colorado, with Senator Armstrong, who would—he'd gather senators to pray with him about it, and I could never tell whether they were more concerned about having to go to his prayer sessions in the morning or voting wrong, but one way or another he got everybody on his side on Sodbuster. And then from there the extension was—shouldn't we do the same for wetlands? And shouldn't we do the same for land that was in crop production? Shouldn't, over time, it have a conservation plan, too? So this thinking came together, our first shot at it, really, in the conservation and environmental community, to step into the world of commodity program money and shift some of it to good purposes, because at that time you had nothing like the Conservation Reserve Program. You had the old Agricultural Conservation Program, which, I think, was maybe \$200 million a year, just doled out sometimes ten bucks a farmer, just to buy some lime for your fields or something—it wasn't really an effective conservation program. So that all began to come together in '83 and '84, and we also had the benefit of great leadership in the House and Senate. We had Ed Jones. We had Jim Johnson and Bob Cashdollar, his staff people, who were fighting it out there. And when on the Senate side, we had Richard Lugar. Couldn't get elected again from Indiana, but he was a towering figure in conservation, and his staff aide was Chuck Connor. I remember very vividly one of the first times I testified was before Lugar, because about this time I started stepping out, and people asked me if I would give the testimony instead of just write it for people, which I enjoyed that. It was an exciting change for me, and I remember testifying before Lugar. He didn't really say very much. There weren't many people around the table on the Senate side. Chuck Connor was there. I didn't think we had much impact. We talked about the need for Conservation Reserve Program. We talked about the need for ... I had coined the term Swampbuster to go along with Sodbuster. We talked about conservation compliance. We presented these ideas at his early legislative hearing in the run-up to the '85 Farm Bill. He didn't say a word; he just thanked us for the testimony. But afterward I later heard from Chuck Connor—Lugar turned to Chuck Connor and he said—take all of those ideas and write a bill.

RK: Wow.

KC: Also something that doesn't happen these days, very often. Except maybe write a bill to undo it all, but ... so they were heady times, and it was an opportunity for a lot of people who hadn't looked at conservation before from the environmental side to really see agriculture in a different way. Who was the gentleman from Nebraska who was with the Sierra Club?

RK: Bob Warrick?

KC: Bob Warrick. Bob Warrick was...

RK: He's on my list—I haven't interviewed him yet.

KC: You got to interview Bob Warrick.

RK: He's a Californian now.

KC: Oh, is he? Ah, so he's...

RK: He lives in Oceanside.

KC: Well, we both wised up. Yeah, we both moved west, belatedly in my case. You know, Bob was critical to bringing the Sierra Club on board. I remember the first time I met him, I thought I have finally met a real boots-on-the-ground, grassroots conservationist who speaks my language. Not only that, he invented my language! I just didn't know it. So Bob and many others at the club and at Audubon Society. The National Wildlife Federation jumped in. NRDC—all of these groups that had never bothered with the farm bill before, so the '85 Farm Bill was the first time, and most of what we got we got in the committees. We had a few fights. Remember former Senator Daschle—he was then in the House—he had introduced the Swampbuster provision as a congressman from South Dakota, and it was accepted. He wouldn't have done that in his Senate years, because he would have been run out of office, as eventually he was for other reasons, I suppose. Dan Glickman, also offered the key amendment in the '85 Farm Bill that got conservation compliance passed. It was a compromise with Howard Wolpe. But they got it through on the floor of the House, and of course he later became secretary of agriculture.

RK: And just for the record that conservation compliance, simply put, basically says that if you're going to get the subsidies you have to correspondingly be a good steward of the land, be a good conservationist, at least on highly erodible land.

KC: Yeah, that's right. That was the idea, and as we puzzled it through and thought about how many acres it would apply to, we had some new tools. We had the National Resources Inventory, all the analyses that were in the American Farmland Trust report came from data that was bootlegged out of USDA, because at that time it was all mainframe computers, and we couldn't do an analysis, really, on desktops at that point, except spreadsheets—you had to manually enter the numbers. But we got a whole bunch, we got reams of analyses conducted for us by a guy named Arnie Miller, who was with the Economic Research Service, and Arnie was one of the inventors of the Conservation Reserve Program, along with Chuck Benbrook. They thought through the whole point of focusing on the land that was so erodible, had so few conservation practices, probably couldn't even handle many conservation practices, that just needed to be in grass or trees. They identified some of that ground through the National Resources Inventory data that was collected on the ground at that time from the Soil Conservation Service, but it was hard to get the data out of the department, so Arnie would go onto the department mainframe and he would do a bunch of analyses, and I would get these pages and pages—it was in this continuous form paper that would just print out. I would ask him some questions and he would try to do some analyses for me, and sometime later up would show a whole ream of paper and I'd look at it and rebuild the spread sheet on a desktop computer, which at that time was about the size of a desk, and that's how we wrote the AFT report, and how all those analyses came about. So to be able to use government data, government information, was a big part in being able to persuade people outside the department. Then we had a few people in the department who were indispensable. One of them was Mac Gray, who later was the head of SCS. He was the chief economist at that time. And then I would even say at that time Jack Block, the secretary of agriculture. For all the criticism that was aimed at him, when push came to shove, as a Republican, he got it that we could maybe make some changes in the way we took land out of production for the CRP in such a way that we would eliminate the need for these year-to-year

set-asides. We could rationalize the supply control a little bit, and it was announced on his farm, the CRP.

RK: Oh, it was?

KC: It was either his farm or Lugar's farm, I can't remember. I think it was Jack Block's farm. But he was there, and he announced it as something he proposed. The environmental groups, we had all proposed something like it, but when he came out in favor of it, that made a big difference, and he was able to cite the USDA data that we had stolen a few years before! [Laughs] We'd borrowed, we'd borrowed! Public data!

RK: One of the things I want to get to is that you've been so successful with EWG in getting at this data and getting it out through the Freedom of Information Act. I want to touch on that. Before we go, though, I was saying that, I was thinking that, as you were talking, the other thing that happened around the mid-80s was there was also, in response, in part, to the farm crisis, was the groups coming together that became the Sustainable Ag Working Group and the role of Ferd Hoefner and people like Chuck (Hassebrook) that came in and sort of, in my view, appeared anyway—I was part of it then—were meeting groups coming from the environment side and coming together with these kind of grass roots groups like the Practical Farmers of Iowa, Land Stewardship, Wisconsin Rural Action—a number of those groups like that, too.

KC: You were a leader, obviously, at LSP at that point, and Marty Strange, he was still at the center, along with Chuck. And, of course, Ferd was, at that time, also centrally involved. As I look back on that, I sort of think that you and the Center for Rural Affairs and Ferd, you know, you were way ahead of me and way ahead of your time in seeing a broader picture. I was so focused on the conservation provisions, and I was looking at what I thought were our strengths and weaknesses in the conservation community, didn't think we could take on the commodity programs and those vested interests in the way that you all were doing in sustainable agriculture. I mean, from the very beginning I thought the sustainable agriculture community and you and obviously the Center for Rural Affairs, in the foremost leadership roles there, I thought had, looking back, a view that really was much more holistic and held together. I came around to those elements, but it took awhile, because the main focus in the environmental and conservation community was conservation title, and we didn't have the band width, the strength, or the political interests. I was not running these groups, but they made it very clear they weren't going to make war on the commodity title or payment limits or any of that stuff and pick those fights. Looking back on it, I understand why those decisions were made, and I was the lobbyist and consultant that was working with them, that came from the conservation side. But I think as the movement has matured, more and more issues now are clearly interrelated, and that need to be addressed. We really didn't get a chance to do that until the early 1990s, at least I didn't through my work. But in the early 1990s it became apparent for other reasons that we needed to take on the commodity title, because that's where the money was, and it's also where it was very clear that there was an inherent unfairness and tilt toward scale and consolidation that was making all the conservation problems much more untenable, much more difficult to take on.

RK: I appreciate your going through that, 'cause I remember that there was, I'd say, a lot of agreement on where we had to ultimately go, but there was a lot of debate internally around these issues of how far you go toward the commodities, for example.

KC: Right. I know there were big debates going into the '85 bill and during that cycle. There was Harkin-Gephardt proposal to require a lot of land be taken out of production on an annual basis as a supply control, as a means of boosting prices without raising taxpayer expenses too much. Ultimately, it didn't pass, but I remember being lobbied very aggressively, the conservation community being lobbied very aggressively, and, by and large, I think people decided that it was not our fight at that time. And there still is ... it's not the EWG anymore; we're right in the middle of those fights now. But at the time it was seen as something that was separate from the conservation title, in the same way that the food stamp community at the time stayed out of the commodity title. And the message that you got from the Agriculture committee, which hasn't really changed, it's just now I don't listen to it as much. [Both chuckle] But the lesson that you got at the time is—we'll give you a chunk of money, we'll take care of you, but don't mess with this commodity stuff. That's not your title, that's not your subcommittee. Fill in the blank. At that stage I think, for the most part, the main environmental groups that had membership pretty much agreed that they would stick to the conservation issues. Looking back, maybe things would have gone differently if we'd taken a broader view. Hard to say in some respects. There weren't all that many policy instruments that we were talking about beyond payment limits, and those can only accomplish so much. But still I think that the holistic view is the view that today, looking forward since 2010 at least, the food movement is, I think, coming to terms with the fact that unless we think more holistically about these issues and find a way to step out of our silos, which is hard. Funders keep you there, missions keep you there, lots of reasons to stay within your lane. But by-and-large, it's pretty clear that if you're an expert in the food system in some way or another, a lot of connections get made, whether it's to conservation issues, food safety, the welfare of low-income people, the loss of small and medium-size working family farms—all of these issues are related. I think it's a little easier for people to make those connections now and act on them than it was back at the '85 Farm Bill turning point.

RK: I wanted to get to know ... if you wanted to talk a little bit more about the years between. In 1993 you moved towards EWG.

KC: Right, right.

RK: And to talk, of course, about some of the things that have been accomplished, particularly the way you were able to dig out that data, and the impact that had. So pick up on that.

KC: Yeah, sure. Well, after the '85 Farm Bill, I went to work for the Conservation Foundation at World Wildlife Fund. Bill Reilly was running them at the time, Russell Train, the great second EPA administrator, great, great Republican leader—they were running those two organizations that had merged under Train and Reilly's leadership. Mr. Train was a friend to the end of his life, and Bill Reilly is still today. So I was able to continue to do work on conservation, but during that time I was also working on rain forests and primate conservation and ethno-biology and all kinds of other things that were of interest to the World Wildlife Fund. I was hired to be an analyst, which I continued to do my agriculture work on, and then I was also the press secretary,

and then towards the end of my time there I was the lobbyist, the first lobbyist that World Wildlife fund had ever had. It was really great. But when Reilly went to run EPA under Bush the elder, the first Bush administration, I had taken a couple of months off to work on the Dukakis campaign, so I was not destined to follow him to a Bush EPA, and so at that point I decided it was a good time to strike out on my own. My friend Chuck Savitt, who ran Island Press, was kind enough to give me a fiscal home and an organizational home. Island Press was doing business as Island Press. It was really called the Center for Resource Economics, it was a (c)(3). So we became the policy program of the Center for Resource Economics, and it was in that way that we started work on the 1990 Farm Bill, and I got some grant support from the Ford Foundation and the Joyce Foundation—our great benefactor for many, many years. Craig Kennedy, Margaret O'Dell and so many others who supported us through the Joyce Foundation and supported so many Midwestern groups to do work.

RK: Yes, they sure did.

KC: They made the '85 Farm Bill debate happen, and certainly, I think, had an impact for us many years after as a major supporter. So we started EWG, and we went through the 1990 Farm Bill, and we thought, well, let's just follow on from the successes of 1985. Just going into that debate we could already see things had changed. And I think one thing that had changed was our success in '85, in particular the Conservation Compliance and Swampbuster provisions, which, again, they were not overtly regulatory, they only applied to you if you took government money through the commodity programs. But if you did, you had to play by rules for how you managed your wetlands, whether you could convert them or not, whether you did the right thing on highly erodible land, whether you were going to be breaking out new land—all of those had conservation rules, suddenly. And this was a big cultural change for the agency that was administering them—USDA, both the technical people and what became NRCS, then the soil conservation service, and also the agency that doled out the money to farmers, the commodity agency. So at that point we saw early in the 1990 Farm Bill debate, the agriculture community was up in arms. The hearings where I testified in 1990 were very hostile. Lots of questions about Swampbuster and why it was forcing farmers to do this and do that, preventing them from using their land. The whole debate about takings started coming to the forefront then, and the Farm Bureau, in particular, some of the general interest farm organizations—I think they really had a sense at that stage that they could cater to their membership by talking about this government take-over of their land, this environmentalist, conservationist take-over. Just completely changed the discussion, and that changed it within the committee, too. We had many fewer friends, not really willing to stick out their chin for us. On the House side we had Kika de la Garza, who always saw the wisdom of avoiding a fight, one that was going to hurt agriculture, so he was a moderating influence. And on the Senate side, the chairman of the ag committee was Pat Leahy. And so in the 1990 Farm Bill we had hoped that we would get significant new money for conservation programs and expand conservation compliance both. We were focusing then on working lands. We wanted to help farmers farm smarter, give them resources to cut back on water pollution, refine their use of pesticides, IPM, all these things. And we got some significant chunks of money authorized, but we began to learn the money side of things at this time. In the 1985 Farm Bill, all that money for the CRP, we were spending billions of dollars within a few years, because it was required. It was basically an entitlement program. Not so with the programs that came about in the 1990s. And we also saw this push-back on Swampbuster and Sodbuster

and Conservation Compliance. One of the bright moments in that whole debate, though, was the organic standards. And that was something that initially, I think the ... we had put together a coalition: [Ellen Haas] from her organization and [Justin Ward] from NRDC, [Maureen Hinkle], all these folks—she was with Audubon still at that time—all came together and we put together a coalition. We wanted to have a healthier food stamp program. We wanted to have money for farmers, but we also wanted them to play by more environmental rules and so forth. We launched with a big project at that time, big coalition. It was very exciting. And we did make some progress. But, with the exception of the organic title, most of the things got settled out in the committee. We didn't have big floor fights. I don't think we had the strength to bring those fights. In the case of organic, it did come down to a fight, because on the Senate side, Senator Leahy could, as chairman, simply write the organic provision. I shouldn't say simply—it still took some considerable work.

RK: With Kathleen Merrigan.

KC: With Kathleen Merrigan as his aide, doing all the detailed work, we had a conservation title on the Senate side, and I remember I got a call from Kathleen one day, and she said—we've got a little problem, can you help it with it, on the organic title. And I hadn't really paid much attention to it, because I thought it was done, and I hadn't realized—and this was the point that she was trying to make—that we have a bicameral system and we have a House of Representatives, and there was a big problem. So she said—I want to invite you to a meeting at the Senate ag committee hearing room. And so I said sure. I showed up for the meeting, and it was Roger Blobaum and a whole bunch of people who were working on the organic title. The staff director at that time for Leahy, Chuck Riemenschneider, came in, along with Kathleen. So I didn't know what was going on. I met with Chuck all the time, but never about organic. I didn't know anything about the bill, really. I had read it, I think, but I didn't really work on it. And so Chuck just laid it out. He said—look, we have a bad situation here. We have no position in the House. We've got no bill at all, no language, and we have the House ag committee that's antagonistic toward organic agriculture. And we've got Senator Leahy's bill, so when we go to conference they're going to pick us apart. And what they want to have is another study, maybe an update—something that slows this whole thing down, and Senator Leahy wants federal organic standards in law, and he wants to start the regulatory process, and so forth. And he said—so Ken Cook is here because he's going to help lead the floor fight in the House to make these organic standards happen. Well, two things about that: first—this is the first I'd heard that I'd be doing that, and Kathleen was sitting there just looking, I think, at her notes, as I recall. She explained it all to me later. I think I'd met Roger, and I'd met a few other people; there was no OTA then. And I remember several people from the organic community at that point saying—we have no money for a floor fight on the House side. We'll have to negotiate. So Peter DeFazio, who was then in his second term, from Oregon, and was not on the agriculture committee, he decided he was going to champion Leahy's bill in the House. So met ... Brad DeVries, was his staff guy, a great—he was just beginning; he was a young guy then. We were all young men, of course, but he was even younger; he was just getting started. Peter had never taken on anything like this in his brief career in the House, and so he started talking to the ag committee, particularly Charlie Stenholm. And Charlie was a wily legislator. I've grown to, really, be very fond of him and respect him a lot, and as time went on I just think ... I find myself agreeing with him on more and more things. But at the time his job was slow this thing down. So he just kept

talking and talking and talking, and we started getting closer to the floor. So finally I remember sitting down with Peter and Brad saying—look, they’re going to talk this thing to death. You’re going to have no time to put a floor amendment together. You’ve got to just take Leahy’s bill or some close version of it, make whatever modest changes you want to make, but don’t change it much, because those were the days when if you had a position in conference on both sides, you couldn’t tear it apart like you can now. The rules of the conference committee mean nothing; you can have identical legislation, they can throw it all out, or they can do whatever they want. The whole thing’s broken down. But back then there was that tradition. So Peter finally realized that Charlie was just going to talk them right to the finish line. We rallied the Sierra Club and Audubon Society. We ... oh, what’s the gentleman’s name—I’m forgetting his name right now—that I hired? He had done a lot of the work on the organic, and I hired him just to come in and whip the vote. I’m really embarrassed I’m forgetting his name.

RK: Maybe it’ll come to you.

KC: I’m just having a senior moment here. And so we went to the floor and we won! It was the only floor vote that the House ag committee lost in that whole 1990 cycle. That meant that when it got to conference Leahy didn’t ... he had other things that he had to fight for, but ... they made a run at the organic title, but there it was in both the House bill and the Senate bill, and in those days that meant something. So we ended up, it took over 10 years, I think, to get the regulations out, but that was a high point, because it really taught us something about, at that time, being able to put together a fight on the floor of the House. Of course, the environmental community was used to doing that. The Sierra Club was built for floor fights, really, at least its federal practice in D. C., bringing grass roots pressure to bear. Audubon, too. At that time Audubon was much more militant than they have been on ag issues recently. But the fact of the matter is that once that fight was under our belt, I think people thought that, OK, no matter what comes next, we can take it on. We didn’t realize what was going to come next, which was the Gingrich revolution, which was a different kettle of fish. But those two farm bills, ’85 and ’90, to get the conservation title and the organic title through—again, I could be wrong, but I don’t think there’d be anyone who would stand up and say that if you had to put those sets of provisions into law now—I don’t think anyone thinks we could do it.

RK: And I want to get to the ... I don’t want to go much longer on this, but the other thing I think passed in ’92 was the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Act, which has grown to be very important and critical to getting good research.

KC: That’s right, and I think at that point ... and I know there were debates on payment limits and other things. Again, I was still not engaged in it, and didn’t see why I couldn’t just stick to the conservation issues and fight those out. There seemed to be plenty of them, they seemed to need all the help we could get. What really changed my mind in the early 1990s was when we had put these funds into the farm bill for conservation purposes that I think would have, if we’d have funded them to the tune of \$5-, \$6-, \$800 million a year, we probably could have helped get through a lot of the difficulties of the early ‘90s and mid-‘90s on endangered species in agriculture and takings and water quality and so forth, because we would have had a robust program that was cost sharing with farmers to deal with these issues. All of those were contemplated in the 1990 conservation provisions. And then, of course, the sustainable

agriculture research piece was coming along, too, and we were really building an infrastructure that was in some ways alternative and in some ways shifting, guiding the mainstream agriculture away, at least so we thought. But the thing that really changed me in the early '90s was we'd had these understandings with the commodity groups and the Farm Bureau that, OK, we're not going to regulate, we're going to do voluntary conservation programs, we're going to ramp up that money, really make it appealing to farmers, get them to adopt these smarter practices. We won't have to regulate. From my standpoint I thought, OK, I don't come from the side of the environmental community that regulates smokestacks or sewer outflow or whatever, I come from the conservation agriculture side, and we were used to voluntary programs, just ramping them up, putting them on steroids. But the money never came. Those first few years I remember very well going to Glenn English, who was chairman of the conservation subcommittee before he went on to run the Rural Electric Association. Great guy, great leader, and I thought he was on our side, but he basically said—look, I agree with you, but they are appropriators, and the commodity groups, the farm groups, are not going to them and saying this is a priority. And that was the first time I really heard farm groups say that not even voluntary programs with government money were good. Because that was the camel's nose under the tent. It did two things they didn't like. First, it acknowledged that there was an environmental problem, which they didn't want to do. And secondly, it started nudging farmers, through incentives, to change their practices in ways that they feared would later become mandated by regulation. The combination of those two, and just the desire to spend money on other things other than conservation—for all the big talk, there seems like never a good time to spend money on conservation. When prices are high farmers got to plow everything up. And when prices are low, they've got to plow everything up.

RK: Exactly.

KC: When do you talk about this in some meaningful way? In the early 1990s, when that money didn't show up, I got thinking with my staff—we had just started Center for Resource Economics/what became EWG a few years later. There was a wonderful agricultural economist who later went on to EPA, but a dear friend, Wendy Cohen, she was, and she got married while she worked for me. She became Wendy Hoffman. And another guy named Andrew Art who worked for me, who was a computer guy, first computer guy I ever had. He's a lawyer now, got a distinguished career, but at the time he was the first person who taught me that we should build databases at Environmental Working Group. So Wendy and Andrew and I decided that we should push back at the farm groups that didn't come through with the money, didn't make good on this handshake bargain. Doing voluntary programs—you want conservation done with support from the public, you need money for that; we can't just hold hands. And we can't ... we can pray over it; nothing wrong with that, but if prayer was going to get it done, it would have gotten it done when Hugh Bennett was starting SCS. So I said—how do we find out about where all this money's going to the commodity programs? That seems to be sacrosanct; we can't touch that. We're told not to touch it. Well, by that time I thought if you're going to tell me not to do something, that's the thing I'm going to do. So I unleashed Wendy and Andy, Andrew Art to look into it, and so they filed a Freedom of ... they were very smart about it. We all thought it through; we were careful. First they filed a Freedom of Information Act request to get the office manuals that the local agency officials used to administer the subsidy programs. They just got the manuals. So when we got those, we read them, and we read the names of the databases and how

they entered data in, because at that time they were entering it already into computers that went to the Kansas City computer center that ran the whole thing. So we read about these farm subsidy data sets, and filed detailed Freedom of Information Act requests for each of the elements in the data set that we wanted. The key thing was we knew that there had been court cases up until that time that made it clear that the government was not going to give us the names of the subsidy recipients. By this time we were into the Clinton administration. By that time I think Dan Glickman had been made secretary after the first secretary, Mike ... he was pushed out of office ... Mike Espy. I didn't know Mike very well until after that, but Mike got a bum deal. But anyway, we decided if we asked for names of recipients it would kill our request. So we decided to ask, instead, for the nine-digit zip codes. So we filed the request, and it took years for it to go through. And finally we had some really good Freedom of Information Act officers there who really saw the merit in what we were asking for, saw that they couldn't refuse us, and so we got our first delivery of the data, and it was a nightmare, basically. It was a stack of about 45 mainframe computer tapes that we couldn't read. We had little Mac computers at the time. So we went out and for \$3,500 we bought a—it looked like a tape recorder, right? A reel-to-reel tape recorder, the kind with the big ... in the James Bond movies you see the room, back then, and the rooms full of the tapes spinning around? Well, that was the storage device of the time, mainframe tape. So we got one of these mainframe tape readers, and started spinning the data off. I don't know how they figured out how to do it. Clark Williams-Derry was the guy who helped us figure that out, and Chris Campbell, our computer guy we hired in the early '90s. We had enough smart people. They could figure out how to strip this data off of the mainframe tapes and put it into an Apple computer environment. But at that time, I mean, RAM was about \$50 a megabyte, or something like that. So we got a gift from Apple at that point, just happened to come along, made all this possible. I think they gave us \$25,000 worth of RAM, just memory chips. Gave us the computers to put them in, and they started spinning off this data. And then, once you got it onto these hard drives—and at that time when we bought our first one gigabyte hard drive—I think it was also a couple thousand dollars. Crazy, and if it hadn't been for Margaret O'Dell and the Joyce Foundation believing that this was going to lead somewhere, and [Pete Meyers] at the W. Alton Jones Foundation, we wouldn't have been able to hire these computer people or doing any of this, but these were two funders who got it. And so it would sometimes take us ... like if at that time we wanted to rank, OK, who were the biggest corn subsidy recipients in every county.

RK: I remember that.

KC: Just running that would take maybe three weeks on these little Apple computers, and they would be spinning and spinning, and if something went wrong, there was a catch in the programming or something, we'd come in in the morning, it would be stopped, and we'd have to go all over again, fix the problem, run it for another three weeks. Well, eventually we got it all down, and I remember Andrew came into me one night and he said—you know, boss, we think we've got it up and running. This was not the internet—it would only work in our office, right? These were our office computers. We had, by that time, built this enormous computer investment. This was '93, '94, something like that. Enormous at the time. So I walk into his office, and he said—so what ... we want to do a first search—what do you want to look for? Top corn recipient, whatever? And I said—can you look by zip code? And he said—yeah, oh yeah, we can look by zip code. And I said—well, why don't you look up 90210, which was the TV

show at the time—Beverly Hills 90210. So he types in 90210, and boom, up comes dozens and dozens, maybe hundreds of subsidy recipients, right in the middle of Beverly Hills, because they were absentee owners, like Mary Ann Mobley, former Miss America—I remember her name was there—but film producers and actors and just rich people who inherited land, had nothing to do with it any longer. So I said—well, that’s our first report; let’s look at big cities. So we did a report called “City Slickers,” in 1994, I think it was, and the way it worked, we’d invite journalists to come in. We said—you can write any report you want to write, we don’t care, but we have to schedule you time to come in and be in front of the computer, because we’ve got other reporters who want to come in. David Fenton, from Fenton Communications—dear friend at the time—he was already helping us do our pioneering work—turned out to be pioneering, my colleague Richard [Wiles] on pesticides—but parallel to that, when I told him this, he said—well, you need to get some reporters there. We had a ... George Anthan came and did work.

RK: *Des Moines Register.*

KC: Yeah, *Des Moines Register*, was the bureau chief then, he came in and looked at it. We had people come in from the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*—all of them. But the one that we knew was going to break it wide open, of course, was the *New York Times*. Was it Steve Engberg, I think? Fenton brought him in, and he sat down with us and he said—well, let me ask you this—is there anything illegal about these farm subsidies going to people in the cities? Well, I wouldn’t say it’s illegal, but the whole intent of the subsidy program is to support family farmers. And he said—prove it. So we pulled out the regulations and the laws, and it’s all about helping family farmers and supporting them and so forth. He said—OK. So he spent a few hours—Engberg I think it is—he spent a few hours on the computer, and he left in a kind of grumpy *New York Times* guy kind of way. We said—are you going to do anything? And he said—I’ve got to do some reporting. So a couple of days passed and we were releasing the report the next day at the Senate ag committee, at a hearing—I think Lugar called it. And I got a call that night, and he said—OK, so my wife and I, we vacation in Florida, and there’s all these gated communities down in Florida. Those are the zip codes I looked for, and I found multiple farm subsidy recipients in those gated communities, and the first guy I called owned a construction company—he was from, I think, North Dakota—owned a construction company. He owned a couple of car companies, car dealerships, and a lot of farmland. And I called him—I didn’t have his name, I only had the nine-digit zip code, so I called everybody in the reverse lookup of the phone book you could get at that time, with that nine- ... and I finally hit on a guy and I said—do you own land in North Dakota? And he said—yeah, I own dealerships, I own all this other stuff. I said—well, do you get farm subsidies? And he said—yes, I get farm subsidies. He was in Florida when he talked to him. He said—do you get farm subsidies, and he said—yeah, I get farm subsidies. He said—what do you think? And he said—well, I’m a Republican; I don’t think we need these farm subsidies. But you’d be crazy, you’d be crazy if you owned this land and could be eligible for it, so now do it. And the *New York Times* guy said—and you’re on the front page of the *New York Times* tomorrow. So that was the first application of the farm subsidy database that led to thousands and thousands of stories and editorials afterward. And for me that was when I realized, what I should have realized, what Marty Strange and Chuck Hasebrook, and you, and Ferd and others were trying to tell us all—me in particular—from 1985 on, that we needed to talk about the social dimensions of this program, the social inequities, the economic inequities that were baked into the subsidy system, that ultimately came back to bite us when it

came time to getting more money for conservation, because they just didn't want to give up that money. They just didn't want to give it up. They liked it just fine. Big farmers could get bigger. They could be paid by the government to get bigger, to buy out their smaller neighbors or weaker neighbors, their struggling neighbors. That whole system was wrong, and it was feeding into the dysfunction on the conservation and environment side. So once we got that, then we decided well let's pursue this, let's get into the fight on payment limits. Let's talk about the distributive impacts here. Let's talk about the need to do that. And so we were Johnny-come-latelys to the fight, but because we had the farm subsidy database, the fight changed. It made all the difference in the world, and I don't say that ... it sounds immodest to say it, but, I mean, we heard from everybody. The first people to embrace the farm subsidy database when it finally went on line, which was only in about 2002 or '03, right before that, were Republicans in the Senate. Senator Nichols from Oklahoma—never had a minute lobbying in front of him, because he wouldn't meet with us, but he went down to the Senate floor and told everybody—you should go on this internet sensation, the farm subsidy database, and see how we're spending our farm subsidy money which is supposed to be helping farmers. In fact, we're helping absentee landlords and very wealthy farming operations that could get by without it. And meanwhile the farmers at the middle and at the lower end, they're being bought out, in part with taxpayer dollars.

RK: Exactly. And I also would like it ... that's a very positive example, but I know there was practically a price on your head, too, at the time. It was not all sweetness and light, as far as getting that out.

KC: No, no. When we finally went on ... we did, in the '95 cycle, we ... that's when we had the data out there that people had to come to EWG and get it, it was still the nine-digit zip code. But then the *Washington Post* won a court case, and it's a brilliant decision—I recommend it to anybody who wants to know about the freedom of the press and freedom of information, and it was a federal court that ruled in favor of the *Washington Post* request to get the names of cotton subsidy recipients—by that time my colleague Andrew Art was in law school, and he came across the case, that's how we found out about it. So we over-filed the *Washington Post* and we asked for the names of all the subsidy recipients. There was a little push-back, but eventually we got them all, so with that we built what became the on-line web-based farm subsidy database that people know today, put that on line. And we had a debate inside our organization about whether we should go public. We thought maybe if you put the names out there it would become a question of identity theft or invasion or overstepping, instead of a policy fight. We heard from people, Democrats in particular—one Democratic office said—if you put that information on-line, we will never work with you again. Now this same office later used that information to try and make the case to farmers that this particular Democratic senator had gotten them a lot of money. But at the time it was red hot. Conservation groups were not sure they wanted to ... this was maybe the beginning of a divide there. And certainly we were then saying to the ag committee—the conservation title is critically important, but you don't get to dictate what areas of public policy the public interest is going to be hands-off on. We're going to look at this commodity title. That's where the money's going; there's never enough for conservation; there's never enough for the food stamp program; there's never enough for sustainable agriculture research or ... fill in the blank. We're all left with pocket change. I mean, not the SNAP program, just because of the number of people engaged, but still the benefits per family are minimal. Not true with the high-end recipients of the commodity programs. As we started putting that out, we

got a lot of push-back, but on the other hand, it formed a foundation. We attracted people to the debate who probably would have, probably not paid attention to it, because it was in the newspaper every day. Billionaires were getting subsidies. The marching band at the University of Illinois and ... state agencies were getting subsidies. Federal agencies were getting subsidies. I mean, it was just crazy, the way the whole thing was being doled out. You could never argue, looking at that list of subsidy recipients, that, to an average taxpayer, this would be the investment portfolio you would want for agriculture with your money. And so we found that that was a breakthrough. But it was a turning point for us. I mean, this is where I became persona non grata. I mean, after the 1985 Farm Bill I was invited to the Farm Bureau National Convention. Invited to the NFU National Convention. We talked about the importance of partnering with agriculture, and I believed it at the time. But when it came to the '90s, and there was a strong pushback against the provisions that required conservation in return for subsidies, and an even stronger pushback at investing more money in conservation, because that might lead to regulation and also it acknowledged that there was a water quality or an endangered species problem—why would we want to acknowledge that? This was the attitude from mainstream agriculture. It was worth breaking from them over that. I mean, we just didn't see where our interests could be advanced over that, because there was no way around it. You couldn't do it through a voluntary program, you couldn't do it through a regulatory program. What were we supposed to do, just watch the erosion happen, watch the loss of wetlands, watch the endangered species go under the plow? We couldn't do it. So we decided to make that step. Not everybody in the environmental community followed us, but a lot of people came to value it and benefit from it. We were happy to play that role. And then we found ourselves getting into the payment limit fights, and having great data to present. If you look at the payment limit fights on the floor, whether it was Senator Grassley, who ... I mean Ferd's leadership there was vital, the intellectual leadership was Ferd's, and how to ... and Chuck's and others ... how to craft these proposals in those farm bills. But the data and the arguments, a lot of them came from EWG, and we're very proud of that, to support that leadership that was really there from the very beginning, from Ferd Hoefner and Chuck Hassebrook and Marty Strange and yourself, right? So anyway, maybe you can teach middle-aged dogs new tricks.

RK: I think so. I would like to have you talk a little bit about, before we move closer to the present and even the future, I'd like to have you talk a little bit how that database has been used by you and Craig and others around conservation issues and things like that.

KC: Sure, yeah. Well, once we developed the web-based version of it, we had lots of requests for information we provided to ... I would literally say thousands of requests for information, mostly from journalists, but also from universities and graduate students and so forth. We used to get ... the Department of Agriculture, during the early period, they would just refer people to us. Actually, reporters would call us and say—I called the Department of Agriculture to ask about some data, and they said come to you. So it really taught us, what I first learned at the Library of Congress those many years ago, if you had the data, if you had the information, and it was important to the debate, it was an important way into the debate and a way to lead it and frame it. So we started applying ... one of the first things we did, we put all the farm subsidy recipients on a map. We used the first generation of Google Maps and Mike Johanns, the secretary of agriculture under the second President Bush for a few years. Secretary Johanns, he used to give a

talk where he talked about the need for payment limits, and his whole speech had only one slide, and it was our slide of farm subsidy recipients in New York City...

RK: Oh, I've seen that slide.

KC: ... showing up on the map. We went in to brief him, and Chuck Connor was there and I remember very well we put that map up. He was very proud of his new wide-screen TV that came up out of some cabinet, right? And we figured out how to get our map up on that screen. It was live internet, and you could go anywhere in the country. He cancelled his next two meetings, I think, and spent two hours with us, just going over the map. He went to where he had moved in northern Virginia when he was secretary. He went back and looked in Nebraska where he ... I mean, he just looked all over the country. So we saw the power of using that information, and we've since refined our computer capabilities, sometimes using farm subsidy data, sometimes using remote sensing information. That's what we're doing a lot of now, where we're able to tell the conservation story in a pretty straightforward way. And one of the things Craig Cox has done in our Ames office is simply said—look, you don't have to be an expert in agriculture or a soil scientist to see that if farmers are plowing right into a stream, that's not good stewardship. Most farmers don't, they keep a buffer, whether they're getting support from the government or not. Most farmers have that conservation ethic. But enough of them don't that we have pollution problems. So he has been able to document that in both Minnesota and in Iowa. Then we've done some great work looking at using remote sensing, satellite imagery to look at hog farms in North Carolina that got flooded during the recent hurricane. But the whole notion of being able to use these big datasets to tell a story and generate multiple stories about agriculture that oftentimes to agriculture's credit, but sometimes they're not. I think the farm subsidy system has supported a lot of good things. Unfortunately, it has also helped tip the balance toward consolidation and abuse of agricultural land, bringing land in that should have been left in grass or trees. So the whole approach to using information technology that we pioneered with the farm subsidy database and some of our early work on pesticides and food has really become one of our hallmarks now. And in a way, once you start looking at the data in that way and start recognizing that your job is to shift debates in the progressive direction, it's pretty hard to avoid stepping into other issues. And so in recent years we've made our top priority in the farm bill be protecting the food stamp program. We'd spent all these years worrying about pesticides in children's food, and how can you be worried about that and not also be worried that they don't have food? And since a third or half of the food stamp beneficiaries, by households, are kids, we've got to feed them. For whatever reason, the parents are on hard times, or maybe if there's some bad reason that they keep getting food stamps—I don't want to say that there aren't some cases where there's abuse, but in the main there's not abuse, it's just people don't have enough money to hold things together. We can't make their kids suffer when that's the case.

RK: I can't resist interrupting and saying—in this personal life, you've had your own kid come into the picture, and I'm sure that opened up your heart to this.

KC: Yeah, no, it absolutely did. I mean, I don't think you have to have a kid to be thoughtful in this way, but it certainly did have meaning for me. And the thought of someone like Cal going to bed hungry at night because there was nothing in the refrigerator just made me crazy. It should make everybody crazy in the richest country in the world. But it turns out it doesn't make

everybody crazy in the same way. Some people think providing those benefits is the last thing we should do. That somehow by punishing the kids or making them hungry, we're going to teach discipline to the parents. Frankly, if they need to be disciplined, it's going to have to be through some other means than having their kids show up at school desperate for food. I don't think that's ... anyone thinks that makes sense. Or seniors, for that matter, who've contributed to the economic and social and cultural-political life of the nation for all those years, and then at the end they don't have enough money to choose between food and medicine, and so they ... they don't eat enough. Well, let's feed them, for God's sake! If American agriculture is as robust and vigorous as we claim, why shouldn't we take care of the least among us to make sure that they have enough to eat, and good food to eat? So as we've started to do this, obviously the organic programs remained a big interest of ours. We get a lot of traffic to our websites now. It's changed the organization. We have thousands and thousands of people who support us, probably on any given day now, through e-mail and our website traffic and so forth, we've probably reached 300,000 people just directly every day beyond what we do in the media. And I say that ... this was also not my ... I watched it happen as all these amazing people who came to EWG made it happen, but it really opened us up to the notion that we needed to understand the way in which policy moves forward, and sometimes your pet issue is not the one that you need to focus on. You need to, as I should have done in the '80s, I should have looked to the commodity programs; I should have seen that broader picture that was adjacent to what I was interested in. I didn't maybe see all the connections, but once I started looking I did see them. That's what environmentalists are supposed to do, understand connections. And I think as we've done that at EWG, we've decided, well, we need to worry about the food stamp program, we need to worry about organic agriculture—it's too small, in my view; it needs to grow. We can't have organic be private school for food, as Phil Landrigan likes to say. It needs to become more mainstream to protect farmers and farm workers and the environment, as well as consumers. We certainly need to make sure that we have subsidy programs that aren't tipping the scales toward larger and larger operations. So we've expanded our work, and we find ourselves now thinking about pesticides and food, food safety. And part of what that led me to do when I moved to California five years ago was think about launching another organization that would really do for food, generally, and all these little siloed organizations—and EWG is one of them—try and bring us together, and the idea was basically to try and develop something that was like the League of Conservation Voters, but for food. The league is the political arm of the environmental movement, and my wife, Deb Callahan, ran it for ten years, and she did a brilliant job. And so one day I said to her—you think this would work for food? It was pretty tough going with her. She asked all the tough questions. Once I got past her it was pretty easy. But do you have enough votes for food in the Congress to score them? Do you think there will be supporters out there? Do you think leaders of other food-related groups, if you've never worked together before, would do that? And those were all good questions, so in order for me to stay in the house and not be sleeping on the couch, I had to answer those questions. And so it turned out there are any number of votes every year, practically, except when the Congress completely shuts down, that are about food. I just never paid attention. There are votes that affect food safety, animal welfare—obviously the SNAP Program—the food stamp program. School lunch, school nutrition, aquaculture, catfish farming, drinking water—you name it. International aid, food aid—just all these important issues—food advertising, right? When you stand back and think about it—and you're in the same position, I think, obviously, Ron—you think, well, I'm not an expert, the way I think of expertise in all those issues, but I'm an expert on the food system. I've

been looking at it for a long time, and I see when Wayne Pacelle over at Humane Society's doing something great to make life better for animal agriculture, for the animals, and for the farmers, too, really. And I see when Mike Jacobson is making progress on food nutrition and advertising to kids and so forth, food additives. So we pulled this group together, and we now call it Food Policy Action. I started it with Tom Colicchio from Top Chef. I got to know him because he made a really important film with his wife, Lori Silverbush, on hunger in America, called *A Place at the Table*. Gary Hirshberg from Stonyfield is a dear friend. David Beckmann was a founding board member from Bread for the World—world food prize winner for his great work on anti-poverty work. Ray Offenheiser from Oxfam. Wayne Pacelle jumped in right away, and a number of others, and we started Food Policy Action. And now this scores every member of Congress on their votes on the floor of the House and Senate every year. We've launched our campaign in this election cycle to try and elect progressive, pro-food movement members to the House and Senate. We're still taking baby steps, but it's very encouraging that people are coming together. Many of these people never met before. And so, to me, once the food movement starts to get a little political—and I think Tom Colicchio says it well—once somebody either gets elected because of what they do for food, or loses their office, loses their seat—we contributed to a couple of those in the last two cycles—once that happens, the food movement will have come of age politically. That's when we'll really say we have a food movement. So I'm very proud that that's ... I'm the chairman of the organization now. It's a completely separate group, but it was incubated at EWG because of this awareness that we are—not to put too fine a point on it—we are really stronger together. I think too many of us in the food and agriculture world have either wanted to or been forced to operate somewhat separately and not see that common ground. I would say an exception to that really is the folks who work in sustainable agriculture, generally speaking, because those connections are central to the way they see the world. But I think those of us working in conservation, environment, food safety, animal welfare—there are some separations, and there will always be expertise in those areas that none of us have across the board. But we do have the common interest in advancing people who come to Congress and vote the right way for the kind of food system we want. We don't want kids going to bed hungry. We don't want agriculture making the environment worse. We don't want animals mistreated in the course of their life on the farm and as they become part of our food. We want to make sure that we don't deplete oceans, that we don't have drinking water that's too foul to drink without expensive treatment, whether it goes into food or directly into our glass of water. All these ideas that come together are at the core of Food Policy Action now. I like to think at this stage in my career that finally, I finally got it and found some ways to bring these disparate voices together. It's amazing to be in a room or on the phone with these folks and hear their wisdom about where the food system should go.

RK: I'm really glad you brought that up, and it's also sort of a perfect segue to where I sort of want to wrap this up, and that is even thinking in light of this election that we just went through, where we have Donald Trump as our likely president, what do you think the emphasis needs to be, both maybe somewhat in the short term and in the long term for food and ag policy? It's a big question, but if you could touch on it.

KC: You know, with the 2016 election, we, really, in the food movement, are up against it. I mean, this is an election that you could see very easily as an affirmation of big agriculture, big food, the chemical companies that play such a critical role, the big grain companies—on and on.

It's not a happy outcome, to say the least. It's very worrisome. This is when our work is most important. This is when our value as public interest advocates and researchers and experts is at a premium, because our job now is to chart a way forward through some very, very choppy waters. We have an administration coming in, it looks to be pretty much in favor of deregulating in many of the areas where we know regulation has been needed, up to and including food safety, but certainly the environment, that wants to privatize big parts of government that we know, if that were to happen, support for hungry people, support for low-income people would vanish, or at least be dramatically reduced. Animal agriculture, our chances of improving the way it operates across the board—and to me, this is a time when the sustainable and environmental and conservation elements of the food movement who do have a practice in Washington—and not everybody in the food movement does; I think that's another problem. We need to develop these political legs and get people up on them and walking, not just around the farmers' market, but through the halls of Congress, where the big decisions are made. But I think this is exactly the time when the food movement needs to step up and be political, in a good sense of the word—not partisan, but just be aware of the fact that unless you make the government do something, don't count on it doing the right thing. From all our years working, Ron, in the trenches, we know that to be the case. Even the very best intentions on the part of a political leader, in the face of withering pressure and criticism and money against them, they wilt, they weaken, and so our job is to show them the way forward, and show them that there is a political rationale as well as a moral and scientific and economic rationale for doing the right thing. And to me, looking at the Trump administration coming in, I just see it's another chance for us to go to the barricades, make clear that we're not going to give up. Clearly market forces are moving the food system in some very positive directions. Big food companies now are simplifying their ingredient lists. They're buying as many organic companies as they can as quickly as they can, because that's the food people actually want. They don't want pesticides in their food, which seems odd—why wouldn't someone want pesticides in their food? Well, of course they don't! No one advertises that anymore. They all want to say—we're cutting back on pesticides; pesticides aren't important. This is all a result of what our movement has been building. We've got to really push through, because we've got some big technological challenges to expand sustainable agriculture, keep it going. Got some economic pressures. It's really hard, I think, for folks in the Midwest, it has been for a long time, to have mixed crop/livestock operations. On one hand there's some economic arguments for it, and on the other hand, you're there at the farm, then, and maybe you want to go on a vacation, and maybe you have to deal with the labor issues and all the other complexities that make it hard to do something other than corn and beans in that middle part of the country, right?

RK: A long ways from markets.

KC: A long ways from markets, finding the appropriate way to market it so that you get some value back—you're not just selling to some other big part of the agri-business chain. I think these are really big challenges that we have to push through. I see organic as a real ... it's now a \$40-plus-billion industry. We still have a big gap in the Midwest, middle part of the country. That's not enough organic there in the grain belt, and not enough organically produced meat. But we can begin working on that. I see a lot of hope again in the marketplace, because I don't think you can shut that down now; people have a different notion of what they want from their food system. They have expectations. Some of those are being monetized, connected to consumer

purchases. That's not going to go away, and I think the organic and sustainable and conservation movement around food understands where we want to take the system now, understands that we're going to be up against it, but we've been up against it for decades now. We've scored a lot of wins. It's not happening fast enough for us. We're advocates; we're paid to be impatient, and I am impatient for more change to happen, but I do think that, looking forward, we've got a great crop of young advocates coming up. I see young people coming out of school now, and they're thinking—how can I change the food system? A lot of them don't think of public interest work, they think of going to a company and changing it there. This was not on my radar screen—I thought of companies as defendants for most of my career. [Both chuckle] But it turns out—again another lesson I've learned—there are a lot of great people out there running some of these, especially these organic food companies. They've scaled up, and they now realize that they can make a difference in the marketplace. There are some fruits and vegetables for which 5, 10, 15, 20 percent of the market now on a value basis is organic. And that's good news. So I see the struggle continuing, or pushing back, still, against chemical agriculture. Now it's bio-tech chemical agriculture. These are big fights. But to me, it's been a glorious chapter, these past 40 years that I've been privileged to be involved in it, and I can't wait to see what the people who come behind me do to make it even better.

RK: Well, thank you, not only for this interview, but for all you've done, and I hope you can keep on keeping on. We'll need your experience and wisdom as we go forward over the next several months and years and make this happen in a, hopefully, good way.

KC: I don't plan on going anywhere. We're going to be here for the fight as long as we've got breath.

RK: Great. Thank you, Ken.

KC: You bet—thank you, Ron.

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